

WARREN COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

COMMITTEE: PUBLIC SAFETY

DATE: APRIL 11, 2011

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

SUPERVISORS VANNESS
GIRARD
THOMAS
CONOVER
MCCOY

OTHERS PRESENT:

KAREN PUTNEY, FIRE PREVENTION & BUILDING CODE ENFORCEMENT
ADMINISTRATOR
PAUL DUSEK, COUNTY ATTORNEY/ADMINISTRATOR
JOAN SADY, CLERK
KEVIN GERAGHTY, BUDGET OFFICER
SUPERVISOR TAYLOR

COMMITTEE MEMBERS ABSENT:

SUPERVISORS BENTLEY
MONROE

DON LEHMAN, *THE POST STAR*
THOM RANDALL, *ADIRONDACK JOURNAL*
JOANNE COLLINS, LEGISLATIVE OFFICE SPECIALIST

Mr. VanNess called the meeting of the Public Safety Committee to order at 11:30 a.m.

Motion was made by Mr. McCoy, seconded by Mr. Girard and carried unanimously to approve the minutes of the previous Committee meeting, subject to correction by the Clerk of the Board.

Privilege of the floor was extended to Karen Putney, Fire Prevention & Building Code Enforcement Administrator, who distributed copies of the agenda to the Committee members; *a copy of the agenda is on file with the minutes.*

Mr. VanNess stated the purpose of today's meeting was to discuss staffing for the Fire Prevention & Building Code Enforcement Office. Commencing the agenda review, Mrs. Putney summarized the chart which included statistics for five other counties, as well as Warren County and the Town of Queensbury, relative to staffing for fire safety inspections. She also referenced the two-page handout which was compiled by the County Attorney/Administrator's Office and included the history of Departmental staffing from 2007 to the present, for which the total number of staff had decreased from 6.5 to 5 during that time period. Mrs. Putney advised that although she required more than 6.5 staff members for optimum production, she would present a request for 1.5 additional staff to bring the total to 6.5. She explained that the full-time Code Enforcement Officer's time would be dedicated exclusively to fire safety inspections and the part-time person would assist with the inspections, as well as plan reviews and emergency inspections as needed.

Continuing, Mrs. Putney summarized the data which included the number of fire inspections completed since 2007 and she noted the correlation between the number of staff and the number of inspections completed. In 2008, she noted, 190 inspections were completed, compared to 21 in 2010 and three completed so far in 2011 due to insufficient staff. She advised that the Planning & Community Development Department was in the process of compiling lists to include all locations in need of fire inspections which she estimated to be between 1,500 and 2,000. She informed that the County's jurisdiction was less than 800 square miles currently handled by three staff members, as compared to 72 square miles in the Town of Queensbury handled by six staff members; and the mileage for county workers was significantly higher. Mrs. Putney estimated County revenue of between \$18,000 and \$20,000 could be generated, although that was not sufficient to offset the full-time salary. Mrs. Putney informed that she made every effort to succeed with one part-time staff last year and it had not been successful due to the number of routine distractions and the lack of time to focus on the necessary work. She said the part-time staff person stayed late to increase production for the time lost due to interruptions.

Mr. VanNess stated that the informational forum of approximately 60 attendees held recently had been a success and noted that most remarks were related to timetable issues. He said that additional staff were needed in order to complete the necessary fire safety inspections and noted peak season would begin now and continue through October. With County permit numbers almost two times that of Queensbury, he asserted the need for additional staff. He said a suggestion made at the forum indicated the need for one person dedicated to plan reviews. He advised that one staff member was currently in training and stated that Mrs. Putney was a certified Code Enforcement Officer.

Paul Dusek, County Attorney/Administrator, declared that the ongoing objective of the County was to maintain or increase productivity of the existing staff while continually minimizing the number of employees. He further explained that this was a juncture in which adjustments should be considered in some areas while continuing to seek ways to reach optimum production outcomes. Furthermore, he said, in an attempt to realize cost savings, staff had been reduced in the Department thereby precluding productivity and targeted outcomes. In essence, he said, Mrs. Putney required approval to add one full-time person, as the part-time person had been included in the budget. Mr. Dusek recommended the addition of one full-time staff person.

For optimum public safety, Mr. McCoy expressed his agreement to add staff and he noted that the data clearly evidenced the need for the addition of a full-time Fire Safety Inspector. Mr. Thomas asked why inspections were not done during the non-peak months and Mrs. Putney stated that the peak season extended through November in 2010 and permits had increased by 20%; thereby utilizing the non-peak months of January and February. She further explained that follow-up work for permits was required which resulted in a backlog. Mrs. Putney informed that routine inspections required an average of two hours to complete and Mr. VanNess reminded of the inclusion of travel time.

Mrs. Putney apprised that fire safety inspections were required every three years for non-residential buildings which included businesses, such as gas stations, retail establishments, apartment buildings, hotels and motels, and farm buildings. She further explained that places of public gatherings required annual inspections and included buildings, such as restaurants, libraries and amusement buildings.

Mrs. Putney expounded that the addition of the full-time person would not be sufficient to eliminate the backlog. Mr. Girard cautioned that if inspectors worked on plan reviews as opposed to fire inspections objectives could not be met and he cited the potential scenario as an example of how County Government grows. He asked if the Committee could be assured that the fire safety inspector be solely dedicated to that work and Mr. Dusek stated that such was his understanding. Mrs. Putney explained that the part-time person was attending training and felt the full training program was needed prior to conducting inspections. The part-time staff, she said, would provide back-up to the full-time inspector and remain mobile to assist in areas of greatest need. Mr. Geraghty expressed his support for the full-time position which must be dedicated to fire safety inspections and Mr. Geraghty acknowledged that the work load had grown out of control and more than one person may be required to eliminate the backlog. Mr. VanNess stated that the lack of staff had effected overall productivity, creating a backlog over several years and the 2010 fire in the Village of Lake George had brought the issue forward.

Mrs. Putney explained that the Cost Coordinator from the Planning & Community Development Department who was currently in training, could not have begun inspections until late January 2011, and there had been no other staff member available for same. She stated her Office received

complaints on a regular basis with regard to turnaround time and added that construction issues used most of the staff time with little remaining for fire safety. She informed that she had piloted many strategies to address the problem such as moving staff and she found that the overall lack of staff mitigated any such efforts.

Regarding mandatory training, Mrs. Putney stated three State courses were mandatory and given monthly and Mr. VanNess asked if there were any candidates currently trained. Mrs. Putney stated that she had received an application from a trained and certified individual who was seeking part-time employment. Mr. Dusek stated for the full-time position there was a list of eligible candidates who were certified. Mrs. Putney stated that one person on the list was both certified and trained.

A discussion ensued and Mr. Girard suggested that the full-time position be held until more production data had evolved following the addition of the part-time person and Mr. Conover agreed and noted that the results would allow further evaluation.

Mrs. Putney reported that revenues and expenditures for 2011 were 17% and 37%, respectively, and she noted there were no permits issued for the year to date. She explained that the part-time person had a vehicle, benefits through the Planning & Community Development Department, and could conduct fire inspections in the municipalities where he was already performing duties as the Cost Coordinator. Mr. VanNess opined that the part-time person serve as support for the full-time inspector who should focus on high traffic tourist areas. The part-timer, Mrs. Putney said, could also work on plan reviews and emergency inspections. Messrs. McCoy and Conover expressed their agreement with Mr. VanNess.

A discussion ensued and Mr. Thomas asked for the details of the full-time position. Mrs. Putney informed that the Grade 17 position had a base salary of \$39,273 and Mr. Dusek noted a total expense of between \$60,000 and \$65,000 which included benefits. Mrs. Putney said she studied the need for staff carefully and additional staff would be required in order to complete the necessary work.

Motion was made by Mr. McCoy, seconded by Mr. Thomas and carried unanimously to approve the request to create the new position of Fire Prevention & Building Code Enforcement Officer, with duties dedicated to fire safety inspections, as outlined above and to refer same to the Joint Finance and Personnel Committee. *A copy of the request to Create New Position is on file with the minutes.*

As there was no further business to come before the Public Safety Committee on motion made by Mr. McCoy and seconded by Mr. Conover, Mr. VanNess adjourned the meeting at 12:19 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,
Joanne Collins, Legislative Office Specialist